SOCIAL LIFE ON CAMPUS:

STUDENT SATISFACTION AND SOCIAL CULTURE

SUMMARY FINDINGS AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE

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Introduction

In October 2016, the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of the College initiated a study to assess student social life at Middlebury. In light of a downward trend in student satisfaction with social life on campus as measured by results of the bi-annual Senior Survey, coupled with concerns around issues of diversity, sexual assault, and campus culture, the College was eager to gain a more nuanced and fulsome understanding of students' experience and satisfaction with social life on campus. The College engaged James Terhune Consulting[1] to assist in conducting the study. The project and corresponding report provide insight into the factors and forces that shape student social life at Middlebury, and offer recommendations on steps the College can take to mitigate problems, improve campus social culture, and positively influence the student experience. This document contains a detailed summary of the study's findings and key recommendations.

Project Overview

The project consisted of four parts and took place over the course of the 2016-17 academic year. Phase 1 involved a review of relevant documents and data (e.g. data from the Senior Survey and recent SGA surveys, historical information, *Middlebury Campus/Middbeat/Beyond the Green* articles, etc.). Phase 2 entailed a preliminary campus visit and a series of meetings with a wide range of campus community members including faculty, administrators, recent graduates, and a cross-section of students. Phase 3 was a series of focus groups and interviews with students from across class years, personal backgrounds/experiences, and broadly representative interest groups, conducted over two campus visits in January and April 2017. Phase 4 consisted of analyzing the focus group/interview responses and preparing the report.

Social Life Defined and Core Issues

The aim of the study was to better understand social life at Middlebury and why student satisfaction with social life has declined in recent years. As such, it is important to understand what "social life" entails and how students define it. When asked to comment generally about social life on campus, the overwhelming majority of community members gave responses that focused on activities associated with weekend nights (mostly involving alcohol or parties with alcohol). However, when students were asked separately how they defined social life, their responses immediately broadened to include things like time spent in dining halls, dimensions of residential life and the range of housing options, clubs/organizations, intramurals, Commons/dorm events, performances, lectures, etc. Ultimately, the common thread to the broad definition of social life for most students centered on time spent with friends and opportunities to connect with peers in meaningful ways. Indeed, the vast majority of students indicated that the key to social comfort and satisfaction at Middlebury is establishing and maintaining a core friend group.

The conversations, focus groups, and interviews with students were candid, open, and far-ranging in ways that produced a great deal of information. Not surprisingly, a few topics/issues emerged as being most influential and important in shaping social life and campus culture at Middlebury. Specifically, the central topics identified in one way or another by every group and participant in the study include:

[1] Jim Terhune, Founder and Principal of James Terhune Consulting, is a highly regarded educator with more than 30 years of experience as a senior administrator and dean at top colleges including Colby College and Colgate University. Jim began his career in higher education at Middlebury as a member of the Dean of the College staff. He is a Middlebury graduate (and parent '17), and has an Ed.M. in Administration, Planning, and Social Policy from Harvard University.

Alcohol and Drinking/Party Culture; Residential Life and the Commons System; Student Social Space; Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity/Underrepresented Students; and Communication, Shared Governance, and Student–Administration Relations. The remainder of this document summarizes the most prominent issues that emerged and key recommendations related to each of these areas.

Alcohol and Drinking/Party Culture

Alcohol is the dominant feature of social life on campus at Middlebury for both drinkers and non-drinkers. Regardless of class year, background, or interests, students identify alcohol as hugely influential on social life. There is widespread agreement among students that drinking plays an outsized role in influencing social life during the first-year. And the nature of student drinking is particularly dangerous in the first two years but tends to moderate over time. Some of the themes and comments students shared regarding alcohol's influence on social life include:

- Alcohol is always present in "social settings."
- Alcohol is key to having a successful event.
- There is "no casual drinking" among first-years. "You either binge drink or you don't drink."
- Hanging out on weekends is not, "Let's get dinner." It's, "Let's get drunk."
- The drinking scene gets old over time.
- Seniors frequently reported that they drink less now than they did as first-years and sophomores.

Alcohol and the drinking/party culture greatly impact the social experience for substance-free and moderate/light (sub-free/moderate) drinkers as well. For sub-free/moderate drinkers the social transition can be very lonely and isolating; and many don't fully find their niche until junior year. Most of the sub-free/moderate drinkers said they like living in first-year halls with classmates who drink. They share lots of interests and want to be part of the core residential experience. But they would like it to be easier to identify other non-drinkers in a way that doesn't make them feel like social outcasts.

Many students talked about alcohol and drinking culture as contributing to a perception of the student body as divided and significantly influenced by cliques, subgroups, and interest groups. The athlete – NARP (non-athlete regular person) divide was referenced by students across the board. Atwater and Atwater parties are seen as the domain of varsity athletes and there are differing views as to who else in the community is welcome to attend them. A number of women and students of color in particular stated that they don't feel safe at Atwater parties. Additionally, underground fraternities and sororities are the source of ire and frustration for many students. They are seen as elitist, divisive, and harmful to the sense of community at the College.

Concerns were raised by students, faculty, and staff alike regarding inconsistent enforcement of alcohol and party regulations. Specifically, it is widely acknowledged that first-year residence halls, social houses, and registered parties are subject to far greater scrutiny than parties in other campus locations; most notably Atwater suites or stand-alone houses. Additionally, there is a strong sense that sanctioning for policy violations is inconsistent in ways that cause students to question the fairness and integrity of the disciplinary process.

Students expressed a range of perspectives on Public Safety. Many juniors, seniors, and students who'd had close interactions with Public Safety said they have good relationships with individual officers and respect them greatly. By contrast, underage students in particular, conveyed a perception of Public Safety as anti-student, and looking to "bust" them. The negative characterizations of Public Safety in the

focus groups seemed frequently to be largely anecdotal and based on second- or third-hand accounts of encounters rather than direct, personal experience. In sum, student attitudes toward Public Safety are varied and complex. According to one senior, students like the people (i.e. Public Safety officers) but they don't like the organization. The danger, of course, is if students are mistrustful of Public Safety, then they may be more hesitant to contact Public Safety for help in emergency situations.

All of this contributes to an "us versus them" quality to the way students perceive alcohol policy and enforcement. This sort of adversarial dynamic, focused largely on rules, tends to shift attention away from issues of health, safety, and personal responsibility.

***Key Alcohol and Drinking/Party Culture Recommendations*:**

- *The College should partner with students to review and update alcohol/party policies and take steps to mitigate inconsistencies in policy enforcement.*
- *The College should work with students who choose to live substance-free to explore ways to help sub-free/moderate drinking first-years in making connections (and increasing the number and variety of attractive social alternatives on campus).*
- *The College should consider creating a Student-Public Safety advisory committee and explore other steps to improve communication and increase opportunities for positive interactions between the two groups.*

Residential Life and the Commons System

Residential life and the Commons system play an enormous role in shaping campus culture at Middlebury. The structure of the Commons system is such that the residential experience for most students consists of two separate and distinct components: the first two years living within the Commons, and junior and senior years outside of them.

There is broad agreement among students that the first-year residential experience is one of the most important factors influencing students' social decisions and satisfaction. Likewise, the two-year Commons residency requirement impacts not only where students live from arrival through the sophomore year, but also how they form friend groups, and what kinds of co-curricular and social connections they choose to make. And junior and senior housing options greatly influence both the ways that students interact across class years, and the nature and range of social events (especially private parties) that take place on campus. As such, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the residential life program in determining social life on campus.

Community members have a wide range of opinions about the role and efficacy of the Commons system. The feedback provided by students suggests that some elements of the Commons are viewed positively, some negatively, and several garner mixed reviews.

The dimensions of the Commons system that students generally regard positively include:

- The First-Year Experience – The first-year experience fosters strong communities that enable new students to make the transition to college life in positive settings. Still, there are challenges that need to be addressed – largely with respect to issues of inclusion for a number of students (e.g. students from underrepresented backgrounds, substance-free students, February first-years [Febs], etc.). But the first-year program is strong and serves the College well. It is worth noting that students are more connected to their first-year residence than they do to their Commons.

- Commons Deans – Commons deans are seen as being present, accessible, and connected to the students who live in their areas.
- Faculty Heads – Students convey that they like both the concept of the faculty head's role, and the people who serve in it. Those who attend programs/events with faculty heads regard those experiences positively.

The dimensions of the Commons system that are regarded negatively or as ineffective include:

- The "Feb" Experience – The majority of Febs don't live in traditional first-year halls nor do they have the same sorts of support from FYCs. Also, because most Febs are housed in sophomore and junior residential areas, it is difficult for them to meet other first-years and they tend to be less connected to their Commons; which adversely impacts their sophomore experience because of the 2-year Commons residency requirement.
- Commons Councils – There is near universal agreement that Commons councils are not functioning well or serving their communities effectively.
- 4-Year Commons Affiliation – With few exceptions direct involvement in the Commons all but ends for most students after the sophomore year.

The dimensions of the Commons system that are widely viewed as being both positive and negative include:

- The 2-Year Commons Residency Requirement/Sophomore Housing – The 2-year residency requirement may be the most vexing issue related to the Commons. On the plus side, it helps foster close communities and enables students to carry forward friendships formed during the first year in ways that mitigate some of the common challenges faced by sophomores on other campuses. Conversely, though, many students feel it is limiting, and creates obstacles to connecting with peers outside the Commons. This is especially challenging for students who don't make close connections in their first-year residential communities. The challenges for Febs noted above also raise questions about required 2-year Commons residency.
- Decentralized Administrative Structure – The location of Commons offices in first-year residence halls increases visibility and facilitates strong connections between Commons staff and students. But it is administratively cumbersome and contributes to inconsistency in policy enforcement.

The range of different types of housing provides a rich array of options (i.e. suites, townhouses, and stand-alone houses) for juniors and seniors to live with the friend groups that students readily identify as the core of their campus social lives. The big challenge is smoothing out inconsistencies in party policy and oversight so as to make it easier and more desirable for residents of townhouses and some of the stand-alone houses to host medium-size parties. The current situation concentrates too much of the party scene in Atwater and the two functioning social houses that throw parties.

The social houses serve a valuable purpose on campus. They offer an important outlet for students to host independent parties that are open to the student community at large. Also, insofar as social houses provide sophomores and juniors opportunities to meet people outside of their Commons, they are an effective mechanism for friend groups to evolve and expand as students move beyond their time living in the Commons. However, the decreasing number of active social houses, and concerns that they are held to more restrictive party oversight standards, may make the status quo ante for social houses unsustainable over time.

***Key Residential Life and Commons System Recommendations*:**

- *The College should undertake a comprehensive review of the Commons system.*
- *The College should explore establishing a housing program to enable Feb first-years to live together and/or with other first-years during their first term on campus.*
- *The College should work with students to identify ways to expand the number of social houses.*

Student Social Space

The need for suitable spaces on campus to support student social life was among the most common topics raised in the study. Virtually every group (including faculty and administrators) identified concerns about insufficient common area and social space available to students. The overarching theme was that there is a dearth of suitable spaces on campus – both formal and informal – in which students can socialize. The concerns apply equally to space in student residences as well as other campus buildings (e.g. McCullough, dining halls, etc.).

Common areas in first-year and sophomore residence halls play a crucial role in promoting an open and welcoming sense of community, fostering a rich intellectual culture, and supporting a wide range of social options. Attractive and inviting shared "hang-out" spaces create opportunities for students to expand their friend groups organically in familiar and comfortable settings. A lack of gathering space drives informal socializing into student rooms in ways that limit friend groups and reinforce siloed, cliquish social dynamics. Moreover, the absence of residential common space contributes to the sense of isolation and "otherness" for many students who are not comfortable in the drinking-centered party scene.

The most salient issues related to social space and junior and senior housing are centered mostly on locations in which students can host parties with alcohol. Large-scale, open parties play an important role in student social life and serve a valuable function. However, students have come to believe that hosting registered parties is overly cumbersome and increases the likelihood of being cited for rules violations. The result is that recognized social houses say they only host open parties because they are obliged to, and students living in suites and stand-alone houses don't register parties because they believe that doing so would increase the likelihood that they would be sanctioned for violations.

Many students identified the dining halls as the most important social spaces on campus. Dining halls are seen as invaluable venues for community building, peer to peer conversation, and forming new friendships. They provide a location for mixing among students across class years and from different residence halls. It is worth noting that dining halls may also be viable locations to serve as multi-purpose social space for student activities and events.

Many students expressed disappointment that McCullough is underutilized and is not a place that students use to "hang-out" or where they are likely to casually encounter one another. Several students indicated they would like to see the Crossroads Café and The Grille open and accessible to students more often.

***Key Student Social Space Recommendations*:**

- *The College should take steps to improve and increase common areas in residence halls.*
- *The College should work with students to develop policies that make it easier and more attractive for students to host parties with alcohol in suites, townhouses, and stand-alone houses.*

- *The College should explore opportunities to make McCullough more available and attractive for student events and as casual "hang-out" space.*
- *The College should explore the feasibility of using dining halls as multi-purpose social space.*

Diversity and Inclusion

There are important dimensions to the ways in which students from underrepresented backgrounds (e.g. US students of color, international students, LGBTQ students, first generation to college students) experience social life at the College that warrant particular attention. Specifically, the social transition to life at Middlebury, socioeconomic status, and feeling a sense of "otherness" are particularly important areas related to underrepresented students' social experience at the College.

Students from underrepresented backgrounds experience social life differently from "majority" students. That is not to say that their social experience is entirely negative; it is not. But in general, the social transition for underrepresented students takes longer and can be more difficult than "majority" students. Underrepresented students in the study were more likely to feel isolated and unconnected to their first-year residential communities. As a result, they tended to struggle more in making personal connections and forming close friend groups. Students from underrepresented backgrounds reported that they experienced a significant improvement in their social lives during their junior and senior years.

Socioeconomic status is a significant force impacting social culture on campus. To a lot of students, many social events (both private and college sponsored) are "elitist" and "institutionally divide people." College events where there is a fee for admission are not equally accessible to all students. One of the factors influencing who throws the parties (that shape social culture) is who can afford to do so; including who can risk incurring fines associated with some disciplinary sanctions. Underground fraternities and sororities in particular are perceived as socioeconomically exclusive. Financial privilege is unquestionably a social force at Middlebury. But listening closely to what lower-income students are saying suggests that access to money is less the issue than the extent to which not having it makes them feel like outsiders.

The idea of being somehow less than fully vested members of the community is the most troubling of the themes related to underrepresented students' social experience at Middlebury. Important examples shared by students from underrepresented backgrounds include:

- An African American woman from a major urban area said that being at Middlebury is the first time in her life that she doesn't have white friends.
- A number of students of color say they feel unsafe at times on campus; particularly walking alone or in small groups at night.
- For underrepresented students, the sense of Middlebury as a divided/factionalized community is largely a function of race, ethnicity, gender or sexual identity, and/or socioeconomic status.
- Some underrepresented students express a feeling that they are not valued by the College.

***Key Diversity and Inclusion Recommendations*:**

- *The College should conduct a comprehensive review of the residential and social transition to Middlebury for students from underrepresented backgrounds.*
- *The College should continue to develop proactive initiatives to engage all campus constituencies in conversations about diversity and inclusion.*

- *The College should work with students to explore developing voluntary, peer-led, inter-Commons "social orientation" groups to help students develop social networks and gain exposure to a wide array of social alternatives.*
- *The Offices of Residential Life and Student Activities should partner with the International Student and AFC staffs to increase cross-involvement of students from all backgrounds in all of their programs.*

Communication, Shared Governance, and Student-Administration Relations

As is detailed throughout this report, several factors contribute to students' social experience and satisfaction at Middlebury. In addition to issues like residential life, alcohol/party culture, diversity and inclusion, and the range of spaces available to support social activities, the ways in which the administration and students perceive, understand, and engage with one another significantly influences student social life and campus culture.

One of the themes that emerged throughout the study was that relations between students and the administration are strained at present. Students perceive the administration as disconnected, out-of-touch with students, difficult to work with, and untrustworthy. A number of students said they believe the administration cares more about protecting the College's reputation than about students, and that students are treated unfairly. Those perceptions are very real and powerful to students, and impact campus culture and how students experience it. But it is also the case that there is a disconnect between the thoughtful, dedicated, and caring approach displayed by administrative staff and the negative ways they are perceived by students.

There is a need for both more and better communication between the administration and students. Throughout the study, students across all class years and demographic groups conveyed limited understanding of key student life policies, administrative processes related to social life, and the ways in which they can shape and influence social options on campus. This suggests that the College community must make working to increase and improve communication between and among campus constituencies a priority.

Additionally, the College should assess and update opportunities for students to participate in policy development and institutional governance. Substantive student participation in governance increases awareness and understanding of institutional objectives, and students provide invaluable insights that can materially improve college policies and procedures. Also, broad and meaningful inclusion of students in institutional governance promotes personal and civic responsibility among students and provides opportunities for them to develop valuable knowledge and skills that will serve them both now and in the future.

Finally, greater visibility and engagement in students' daily lives by administrators would help to foster better relations with the student body. The Middlebury experience is "high-touch," personal, and individualized, placing a premium on one-on-one engagement with students. But at present, many members of the central administration are largely isolated from and unknown by most students. Increasing direct, ongoing interaction with students provides opportunities to become known by, build trust, and partner with students to enrich their experience and advance the College.

***Key Communication, Shared Governance, and Student-Administration Relations Recommendations*:**

- *The College should review, assess, and update its approach to student communications.*

- *The College should assess and update opportunities for students to participate in policy development and institutional governance – particularly related to matters that significantly impact student life.*
- *The administration should consider ways to prioritize and increase direct, ongoing interaction with the student body.*

Conclusion

The 2016-17 Social Life and Campus Culture study provided a great deal of insight into the student experience at Middlebury and identified a number of issues and topics that warrant attention going forward. As with any project of this kind, the report tends to focus on problem areas and ways to address and improve them. As such, it would be easy to get the impression that the social scene at Middlebury College is a disaster and that students are wildly dissatisfied. That is unequivocally not the case. To the contrary, there is much more that is good and positive about the student experience at Middlebury than bad or negative. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of students who participated in the study came across as generally happy, personally satisfied, and positive about their Middlebury experience.

The biggest take-aways from this project center on the ways in which the College engages, interacts, and partners with students on matters related to social life and the student experience broadly. Increasing student participation in governance and policy development, and improving communication with and to students about matters that greatly impact their lives and experience is crucially important. Likewise, reviewing the Commons system and clearly articulating the values, mission, and objectives that drive student life will help focus decision-making and provide direction going forward.

Ultimately, the work to follow this study will provide a unique opportunity for the College and students to work together to further enrich the Middlebury experience.